

# The role of minimisation during addiction.

*By  
Darren Hamburger*



SOUTH WEST CHILD, ADOLESCENT  
AND FAMILY SERVICES ASSOCIATION

*1<sup>st</sup> September 2022*

## **The role of minimisation during addiction**

By  
Darren Hamburger

The fundamental role of minimisation during addiction are similar, be it Heroin, Alcohol, Cannabis, Gambling, Shopping and the like. Overall addictions are widely recognised to cause harm in the short and longer term.<sup>[1]</sup>

This article will focus on the role of minimisation during addiction. I believe minimisation is an important topic to discuss because it is often connected with initial experimental use, cause of relapse or the cause for the continuation of an addiction. In this article I use the phrase addiction generically as an all encompassing umbrella term, as I am not only referring to substances alone. I also include but not limiting too gambling, gaming, sexual & excessive shopping. One could say actions which are repetitive and taken to the excess causing negative consequences to our lives will invariably tend to fall under the umbrella term 'addiction'.

It is not an uncommon phenomenon where people may fail to grasp the significance of their own addiction until in the more advanced stages. This is because the initial stages of addiction are frequently miss characterised or downplayed in a joking or lighter manner IE "gee your always on that computer" "you should marry that phone your always on it" even "you would bet on two flies running up the wall". These light hearted minimisation are often taken in their stride and when left unchallenged may result in difficulties at a later date because the excessive behaviour continues.

Addictions will at some point cause people to loose self control or engage in high risk taking behaviours which eventually affect themselves or others. One example could be the use of an 'inter lock system' program which aim's to prevent vehicle accidents occurring by restricting high risk driving recidivism offenders starting their car while alcohol is present on the breath. Rahman (2022) sited studies which identified Interlock programs to be an effective modality to prevent motor vehicle accidents by reducing drink driving recidivism.<sup>[2]</sup> The high recidivism rates are due to addiction causing lack of self control and minimisation to the risks of driving while intoxicated accompanied by overruling self serving needs.

Loss of self control and the loss of ability to accurately judge ones own capacity to perform tasks while under the influence of central nervous system substances is not uncommon. Verster & Roth found drivers who consumed central nervous system substances such as alcohol, hypnotics, anxiolytics, analgesics and H1-antihistamines were not always capable of predicting their own level of impairments when driving.<sup>[3]</sup> However the impeded ability to identify intoxication severity is but only one aspect with regards to recognising their is a problem. Underlying psychological conditions, environmental, sociocultural norms and peer pressures may also act to indirectly coerce the minimisation of our actions, and hence detract from future addiction risks.

When we contemplate addictions, we must be under no illusion minimisation occurs so frequently and playing a very significant part in contributing towards the initiation of experimentation, relapse or continuation of an addiction. One example of minimisation within the Australia culture is how alcohol is consumed. Weddings and other events such as parties, sporting events, barbecues and even "to take the edge" off a rough day are normalised views when consuming alcohol. Moreover, alcohol is a widely advertised product and is encouraged to be consumed. Perhaps the greatest irony is that Alcohol has been seen to cause much destruction in peoples lives and was also recognised as

such in the Australian National Drug Strategy household Survey (2020) suggesting alcohol “is a significant source of harm to the Australian community”<sup>[4]</sup> yet it is readily available to buy legally.

Fundamentally, minimisation processes work by gradually alleviating the initial protective restraint which invariably influences an action or belief to be permissible, much the same way an axe slowly chips away at a tree until the tree falls. For example, I may initially choose not to drink alcohol because I wish to remain abstinent, however during the process of minimisation the initial desire not to drink alcohol wanes and I may succumb to certain influencing factors which encourage me to think it’s o.k if I have just one drink. Below are some common examples of minimisation for a person experiencing alcohol dependence.

Initial Desire	Minimised Cognition's	Action
I don't want to drink alcohol / I will not drink alcohol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It’s only one drink” It wont make me drunk, it wont hurt</li> <li>• “It’s OK I haven’t had a drink for 6 months”</li> <li>• This is a lower alcohol content drink compared to others I normally drink</li> <li>• I can control my drinking now, forget my alcohol dependence history</li> <li>• It wont be like last time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It’s OK to have a drink</li> </ul>

As we can see from the examples above, recognising the power how minimising our actions may change our initial thoughts or beliefs is a significant component in relapse prevention. For a person who is alcohol dependant, that one drink could very well cause the person to continue drinking alcohol for longer periods of time until abstinence is once contained. However this example only highlights minimisation internally from the individual, however minimisation can be perpetrated but others around us such as peer pressure or even by others not recognising how difficult it is to remain abstinent as they do not experience such difficulties. An interesting example is the “Drink responsibly or gambling responsibly” TV commercial campaigns. Where the only truly responsible action is not to drink alcohol or gamble at all which can not be any more true for those who experience or have a history of addiction. It is the same reason the phrase “one is too many, ten is not enough” which highlights the point that it is much wiser not to engage in consuming a single drink of alcohol, because often a person who is alcohol dependant is likely to continue drinking alcohol more times than none. This is of particular importance given alcohol and/or drug use was identified as one of many risk factors for a NSW police intimate partner violence assessment<sup>[5]</sup>.

Twerski (1997), discussed the concept of Denial, Rationalisation and Projection which are distortions of the truth one way or another seeking to unconsciously maintain the addiction.<sup>[6]</sup> Some interesting examples of minimisation are as follows:

**Minimisation through lightening the language:**

We may tend to minimise the risks when consuming alcohol e.g in the early stages of addiction or with excessive consumption of alcohol language may be used to describe certain behaviours such as “Going a bit far”, “drinking a bit much” or using other slang terminologies such as “driving the porcelain bus”, “drinking like a fish”. These terminologies may illicit a giggle however all minimise the severity by using humour to underscore a person has consumed alcohol in excess.

**Minimisation due to seeing circumstances independently to ourselves (Rationalisation):**

We may minimise an addiction by viewing ourselves differently. For example phrases like “I’m only a social drinker”, “I have nothing in common with them”, “I don’t inject so I am not addicted”. These examples have one thing in common, the minimisation attempts to separate one persons excessive action and depicting it to be no way similar to others who may be in an active stage of addiction. Thereby advocating it is O.K to continue with an action regardless of future risks which has potentially devastating future repercussions. This type of minimisation tends to lull a person into a false sense of security by dismissing the dangers which may lay ahead.

**Minimisation through denial:**

Denial does not necessarily relate to a direct refusal as an outright “No”, it may also be seen by the rejection of certain of truths e.g one such fallacy during addiction may be a person believing they can control the addiction and use their substances at the same time and prevent it from escalating i.e Heroin. This fallacy disregards the persons ongoing history of relapsing, financial difficulties and ending up serving a jail sentence due to ongoing opioid dependence.

**Minimisation through normalisation:**

Normalisation is a type of justification to proceed with an action. A person may normalise certain behaviours by comparing past actions to current lesser actions in order to justify that it’s OK to proceed. One example of this maybe “I’m only smoking heroin not injecting it”, “I’m smoking Cannabis because it is a lesser drug”, “I’m selling the drug because they would get it elsewhere”, “Everyone smokes Cannabis”, “Everyone drinks alcohol”.<sup>[7]</sup> For persons without addiction these phrases may be interpreted differently, however for those with addiction these phrases minimise the actions to pave the way to continue with the addiction.

**Minimisation through projection:**

Projection is the process whereby people will lay blame onto others when the error lays solely in their own hands.<sup>[7]</sup> Common projections I have witnessed during counselling sessions with clients are “they made me angry so I used”, “My partner broke up with me so I used” or “I talked about my addiction so I used”. In all of these cases, the blame is pointed externally to other reasons, other than accepting the fact the decision to use the substance was their own, and their responsibility alone.

To conclude this article, I will say one last thing for the reader to contemplate. No single person deliberately set out to become heroin, alcohol or other substance dependant but it occurred, much the same way no gambler deliberately set out to walk the road to financial ruin though it happens. Yet at some point in all addictions the role of minimisation has and will always play its part contributing to the difficulties experienced as a result of the addiction. One trick to overcoming addiction is to learn to recognise where and how minimisation works and how to counter such fallacies.

At CAFS, we understand addiction is present across all facets of our society and can be a source of much familial disruption. To help keep families together and stronger we offer the first steps to understanding and overcoming addiction with free individual counselling sessions and by starting an addiction support group for families in addition to an alcohol dependence support group.

## References

- [1] Fairfield City Council (2021), 2021-2022 Drug Action Strategy. p.1-24  
<https://www.fairfieldcity.nsw.gov.au/files/assets/public/documents/community/2021-2022-drug-action-strategy.pdf>
- [2] S. Rahman (2022), Predictors of commencement and completion of the NSW mandatory Alcohol Interlock Program. *NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research :Crime and Justice Bulletin*: No 160 p. 1- 15
- [3] D. Hamburger (2020), The Elephant in the room: Effects of prescription medications on driving performance. <http://helpmyaddiction.com.au/docs/articles/elephantmed.html>
- [4] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020), Nation Drug Strategy Household Survey 2019. Drug Statistics Series no. 32. *AIHW p. 1-90*
- [5] F. Leung & L. Trimbol (2022), Improving police risk assessment of intimate partner violence. *NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research :Crime and Justice Bulletin*: No 244 p. 1- 27
- [6] A. Twerski (1997), Addictive Thinking: Understanding self deception second addition. *Hazelden Foundation* p 1 – 156
- [7] D. Hamburger (2019), Should I stop taking my methadone.  
<http://helpmyaddiction.com.au/docs/articles/Should%20I%20stop%20taking%20my%20Methadone.html>